

When it Mattered

Episode 40: Angela Reddock-Wright

Chitra Ragavan:

Joining me now is Angela Reddock-Wright, founder of the Reddock Law Group. Angela, welcome to the podcast.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

Chitra Ragavan:

So where did you grow up, and what was your childhood like before you moved to Compton, California?

Angela Reddock-Wright:

Well, my father was in the military, so I actually was born in Frankfurt area, Germany, but I don't remember much about it, because we left there when I was one or two years old, and we went back to my parents' hometown, which is Birmingham, Alabama. That's where both my parents and their siblings grew up.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So I lived in Birmingham, Alabama until I was nine years old, and from there, my parents divorced when I was young, and my mom, seeking a better life for us post-civil rights Birmingham, Alabama, moved to California as a part of the great migration of Southerners that either moved to the West or moved north, and so some of her siblings had moved west already to California, specifically Compton, California. So we moved there when I was nine years old.

Chitra Ragavan:

So growing up as a young girl in Birmingham in the black South, how did that initially begin to shape your views?

Angela Reddock-Wright:

Well, it had a great impact on me. I was born in 1969, and so I was young as the Civil Rights Movement was starting to close out and evolve into a different type of movement than the type that my parents and their parents and so forth experienced, one with Jim Crow and dogs and beatings and so forth. As a child, I was shielded from a lot of that, so I grew up in sort of an idyllic environment, with grandparents on both sides, where you would sit on the porch and you would say hello to people as they passed by.

Everyone was referred to as kin folk, because we all knew each other. I remember Southern traditions like sitting with one of my grandmothers and drinking coffee with her, even as a young kid, out the bowl.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So, on one level, it was idyllic. It had a lot of Southern traditions, but I do remember, obviously, even though I wasn't in the heart of marching or anything like that, I have memories of those conversations and of people still being very active in the movement. My maternal grandmother in particular, Frida Gills, she was a home healthcare worker and was very active in the Civil Rights Movement and in her community and in the union that represented the workers. So I remember, as a child, going with her to her union meetings and hearing the discussions about better wages for workers and better conditions for workers, and I also remember being out on the picket lines with her at least two or three times as a child, not quite realizing what it was all about, but understanding that my grandmother and her colleagues and others were fighting for better conditions.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So that experience, coupled with being surrounded by the remnants of and the conversations of post-civil rights Alabama, kind of really shaped my understanding and helped me to have a commitment to advocacy and looking out for others and being sensitive to social issues. It really shaped my experience, although I only grew up there until I was nine. But it was significant, even in that short amount of time.

Chitra Ragavan:

Then so what was your move to Compton like? Then you also had another kind of big change in the school that you began to attend. So tell us about kind of those shifts.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

Right. So we moved to the famous Compton, California. Many would use the word infamous, and I like to say famous, because I believe there are two Comptons. So we've all heard the movie Straight out of Compton and famous rappers, like Ice Cube and others, that are from Compton and made it famous, in a way. I actually grew up ... When I watched the movie Straight out of Compton, I realized that I was growing up in Compton during the time that many of the things that we learned about in the movie, but I guess, again, I kind of grew up in an idyllic world and in a side of Compton that people don't see, which is a working class community of individuals and families that are really just trying to make a better life for themselves.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So that's the part of Compton that I grew up in. So not that I wasn't surrounded by gangs or knew about gang activity or drug activity, but the great majority of people in my world were people who were just doing what everyday Americans do. They go to work. They feed their families, provide for their families. We were very active, and I was very

active in my church. My mom made sure I always had something to do, whether it be at church or other community activities or enrichment activities.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So that was my Compton, even though there were sort of the surrounding things happening. But, fortunately, I grew up in a community of people who looked out for the kids and made sure that we had a positive upbringing.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So I went to my elementary school. I started elementary school in Compton at Longfellow Elementary, and then I went to junior high school at a school called Willowbrook. Our principal, his name was Lawrence Freeman, and he reminds me of the principal from that movie Lean on Me, whereas he was a strict disciplinarian, but he cared about the kids, and he challenged us to be our best. Through his relationships, we established a partnership with a well-to-do independent private school in the area called Brentwood in Los Angeles, which is kind of a well-to-do area of Los Angeles, bordering UCLA and Beverly Hills and Bel Air and Palisades and places like that.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So he had built the partnership with that school where, each year, they would accept a number of students from our junior high school to come there on scholarship. So in ninth grade ... Well, I didn't go until tenth grade, but I got accepted in ninth grade. I was fortunate to be able to go, and that experience, coupled with moving from Birmingham to California, it was another one of those experiences that really changed and impacted my life.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

I found myself living in a dual world, one where, each day, I went home every day to Compton and had my family and my friends and my church and others there and continued to have a great life, growing up there. But each day, whether it be by bus, city bus, or by the time I turned 16, I got a little bucket of a car. When I first went there, my parents would take us there. It's about 20 miles from where we lived. At the time, fortunately, LA traffic was not as bad as it is now, but it still was a drive.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So however I got there, and there were other students that we all were coming from the same area and we would go together, we were going into a different world, one that was very different from the world that we lived in, and it was the kind of world ... Some students went and were successful, such as myself. We were successful. We were able to make the transition and able to kind of maintain our sense of who we were and where we grew up, but also understand the value of this experience in getting an education that was at this higher level than where we were. I had a great education, but the level of added experiences and the types of classes that we were able to take and the focus classes and the much smaller classes were just at a much higher level than we had in public school.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

Then, also, we were around people that had substantial wealth and substantial opportunities and so forth. At young ages, people had these exclusive cars, and spring break, they'd say, "Where are you going for spring break?" I'm like, "I'm going home," and they, on spring break day, would be going off to Hawaii or to Europe or what have you.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So it was just a totally different experience, but it opened my eyes to a new world of new possibilities and opportunities, and it was just another experience that shaped what I believe became my dual life of service to my community where I grew up, but also taking advantage of other opportunities that allowed me to grow, to expand my horizons, and to see the world bigger than the limited opportunities or exposure that I may have had, based on where I grew up. So it was a definitely a significant transition.

Chitra Ragavan:

Would you also say it was the most challenging, and, if so, why?

Angela Reddock-Wright:

Challenging... First, it was challenging academically, because I had always been a superstar student, and I want to be careful not to say, "Oh, my education before that was bad," because it was amazing. I had amazing teachers and, as I mentioned, Principal Freeman, who really just shaped much of who I am today. But if you can imagine going from a school, say, with hundreds or thousands of students to one ... I think in my class at Brentwood, my class was about 75 students. So probably in ninth grade at junior high school, my class was probably 500, 600 students or so, maybe less than that, I can't remember, but definitely more than 75.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So in a class of 75, the teachers obviously can provide much more focused attention. In a school where parents are able to invest financially in other means and resources and bring added activities and exposure to the school, it just made a difference.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So when I went to Brentwood, students had taken classes like Latin and much more extended history courses or math courses, et cetera, that I had not been exposed to, and so it took me a good year just to adjust academically. Fortunately, I had teachers that were vested in my success there, and they really took time with me to help me make the transition.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So that was the first challenge, of going from being the superstar student to being a student that was struggling. Ultimately, I turned it around, and I graduated and was successful and able to go on to a great college.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

Then the social transition. While I adjusted and did well, ultimately served in student government, I was on the pep squad, I was in school plays, I played the violin, I did every great thing you could do in high school, but that first year was a year of transition and just realizing this was a tremendous opportunity. Whatever struggles or feelings I had about sort of leaving my friends at home behind, I had to realize it wasn't about leaving them behind or giving up my life in Compton, but it was about embracing new opportunity and being thankful that I had that opportunity.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

The other way it shaped me is it helped me to realize that not everybody would have those kinds of opportunities. So because I was blessed to have that opportunity and have had so many since then, that it's incumbent on me to always give back and always to go back and help someone else to have those same opportunities. So I live by the motto of to whom much is given, much is required. Also, I live by a servant leadership model, which means that you're a leader, but the best leaders are those who realize it's best to be in service, to use your leadership for good. So that experience in particular helped me to begin to form those principles as life principles that I live by and that I lead by.

Chitra Ragavan:

So you went on to become an employment and labor lawyer and a mediator and arbitrator. I know there are three or four areas of law where you're seeing some of the greatest changes, and we can talk about that, but I guess even since we last talked about this interview, I mean, the coronavirus pandemic has set in. So we kind of now have to layer in the impact of the pandemic on all of these areas of employment and labor law. So how would you say ... What is the biggest impact? Obviously, there's millions and millions of people who are out of work. How is this going to shape your practice, and what are the biggest challenges you see?

Angela Reddock-Wright:

Wow. Well, I have been this last week, two weeks, have literally been on the phone with employers, employees that are really ... and employees that are really trying to understand what to do. This is beyond anything that we have faced in recent American society, and global society as well. There have been pandemics in the past, but none in my lifetime where the entire community was shut down, where people could not go to work, they could not go to church, they could not be outside or spend time with their family and friends.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So this definitely has shaken the world and the world of work. I mean, just today, on the news, they reported that since the beginning of this pandemic, or the shutdowns, which have been going on two weeks, that there have been over three million unemployment claims filed.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So my biggest advice to employers is, one, obviously, many employers have had to make some tough decisions that even the best of employers that care about their employees and treat their employees well, just by virtue of the fact that they don't have patronage at their business or that people aren't using their services, even I in my own business have ... I was scheduled to begin some new contracts for different services, and I put a hold on those contracts, simply because I don't know what's going to happen.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So my advice to employers has been, as you navigate this, still remember ... Yes, our circumstances are different, but the rules are still the same, that if you're going to lay people off or if you're going to terminate people, a basic principle of employment law is that it has to be for legitimate business reasons. Well, in a state like California, employees are at will, so you can terminate for any reason, as long as that reason is not illegal.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So, in this instance, if employers are legitimately terminating folks, which is not unimaginable, terminating folks because they simply can't keep the doors open or keep them open at this time, then that's a perfectly valid reason for an employer to terminate someone. But where some employers can get into trouble is if they're using this pandemic, this global crisis as a way to try to get rid of folks that they've been wanting to get rid of for a while, but now they're sort of using this as an excuse to get rid of folks.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

I don't think many employers are doing that, but where they have to be careful if they are suddenly making decisions based on discriminatory or illegal factors. So say, for example, there was a woman or disabled person or a person that's of a certain religious belief that, for whatever reasons, an employer may have some bias against that person, and now they're using this as an opportunity. Then that's where employers need to be careful. They need to make sure that any decision they make is based on true, legitimate reasons, which is "We simply cannot afford to do business anymore," or if an employer picks they're going to maintain, keep their doors open in a limited fashion, and they're going to lay off all the women and keep all the men or vice versa, or layoff all people of certain religious beliefs and keep everybody else, then those are reasons that could be a red flag for what we call traditional discrimination.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So I've been encouraging employers first to stop and to be calm, not to panic, and to think about this in a methodical way that makes sense and that does not put them in a situation to where, after this is all over, that they suddenly have a crisis on their hands of dealing with discrimination suits.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

The other thing is many employers are having to think through their sick leave policies and their other leave policies, because many employers are trying to keep their employees on as long as they can and so they are expanding their policies to expand the time that people can be out, to provide people paid leave, when they otherwise would not be required to, just to try to help people out. Obviously, we see examples with the bigger companies, like Starbucks, who are committed to pay their employees for the next 30 days, whether they work or not.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So helping small employers in particular that want to try to figure out a way to keep their employees onboard, helping them to do that in a way that's legal, that's consistent with their policies, and that doesn't put them in a precarious situation after all of this is over.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

Then, obviously, employees, just trying to understand ... Throughout the years, employees always get employee handbooks, and we read them. Sometimes we don't read them. But this crisis is forcing employees to try to understand what are the benefits actually available to them? What types of leave are available to them? So I've just been on the phone with employees, even, and doing Facebook Lives and other ways to try to get the word out and give people an opportunity to ask their questions of really trying to understand, "What are my rights in this situation?"

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So I will just close this thought by saying, at some level, the pandemic makes us feel like, "Okay, all the rules go out the door. We can just throw all the rules out the door. Nothing matters now. We can do whatever we want," and my biggest caution is to say, "No, they don't. The rules are still the rules," and, although this is causing many to panic and to react in a way, or to just simply react, that we can't react, especially as business owners. We've got to stop. We've got to be smart and make sure that we're getting good counsel in terms of how to navigate these issues.

Chitra Ragavan:

One of the cutting edge areas of law that you've been looking at is the gig economy. With the advent of Uber and DoorDash and Lyft and all of these companies that have come up, what are some of the issues that you are facing in the gig economy?

Angela Reddock-Wright:

Specifically with the pandemic or just generally?

Chitra Ragavan:

I guess both. I guess you can't separate them anymore.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

No. So prior to the rise of COVID-19 in the workplace and in society, this last year or two years or more, there has been lots of activity, legislative activity in particular in California, where states and legislatures are trying to grapple with how to develop laws that protect the gig economy, not only in terms of issues of discrimination and harassment, but probably more so in the area of how they're paid.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So you take a company like Uber or other gig economy companies, their employees or their workers were classified as independent contractors, which meant, ideally, that they worked whenever they wanted to work. When they worked, Uber would pay them a percentage of the fares collected, et cetera. Many of the workers said, "Wait, we need benefits. We need a guarantee of wages, at least minimum wages, when we're working." So they banded together to try to be reclassified as employees.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

In California, the legislature passed, effective January 1, a law which basically ... and it's an evolving law. There's been case law before this, but it basically says that when an employer classifies someone as a contractor, that the presumption is really that they are an employee and that there is a three-prong test to determine if they are an employee or a contractor. That test really centers on whether an employer has control over the worker and whether the worker has other clients and other services that they provide, outside of that employer.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So if you look at the average Uber driver or PostMates delivery person or what have you, this is really just a supplemental job for them, is what the courts are saying and the legislature is saying. They really aren't people who are in business and who have other clients. This is just another way for them to supplement their income, and so these individuals really are employees.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So that's kind of the state of the law, that the presumption is that if you are working as an individual, just providing a service at the direction of an employer or a company, that you really are an employee. So that's obviously had a great impact, even before the coronavirus crisis, in that these companies, the gig economy companies, are really trying to figure out how to revise their business models, because their entire business models were based on classifying these individuals as contractors, which means they didn't have to think about benefits. They didn't have to think about overtime. They didn't have to think about meal breaks or rest breaks. So now they have to think about all of those questions.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

In the reverse, while there are many workers who really advocated for these changes, there are many, like journalists and musicians and others, who have indicated that they prefer to work as contractors, because they do have ... Journalists might have multiple

newspapers or print media that they write for, and they want to be able to do that without piecemealing, being treated as an employee, where if you're an employee, there's a much higher expectation that you're sitting there. You're available eight hours a day. If the employer says do something, you're going to do it. So they prefer their independence, and the way they make a living, it's by putting together income from multiple sources to have that add up to a decent living. So there are many who aren't happy with the direction and are seeking exemptions.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

I think where the legislature has to be thoughtful and more creative is realizing that we're in a different economy now, that work has changed. Work has changed from the industrial work age, in that we now have a third category of workers that are really using opportunities like these to make extra income. So they definitely don't qualify as contractors, but is there a third category that we could create that still allows the companies like Uber and similar companies to come about, because they are offering a service and are creating opportunities for people that individuals would not currently have so we allow those companies to be successful, but, at the same time, protect the rights of workers and make sure that people are not being taken advantage of in the work that they provide.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

Then the last thing I'll say, in this coronavirus crisis, there's obviously an impact on employees, but the difference is employees are able to apply for unemployment so, hopefully, that the employees impacted will be able to get some supplement during this time, and then the federal government and many state governments have passed laws that are providing other supplemental income and opportunities to individuals who are employees.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

The individuals who might get lost in this whole pandemic and really might suffer substantially are the small business owners and independent contractors that won't qualify for unemployment, particularly if they haven't worked as an employee in many, many years.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So I know there's conversations around offering loans and other opportunities to individuals that fall within that category. But this perhaps proves the point of the legislature, that if you're sort of in this middle place, where you're like an employee, but you're not classified as an employee, in a situation like this, you may not get all the benefits that those who are employees are getting.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So, ideally, these individuals would have savings and so forth. But we know that's a whole 'nother discussion, that it's very difficult for Americans to save, because our salaries and our income, they have not progressed at the level that it takes to live,

particularly in major cities like Los Angeles or New York, et cetera and also be able to have savings and reserves for times like this. So it's a tough issue, all around.

Chitra Ragavan:

It's kind of interesting, looking back at your life, that your maternal grandmother was fighting for the rights of a lot of these types of workers, and here you are, kind of looking at a lot of the same issues, but with a huge epidemic or pandemic layered on top of it.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

Right. Yep. No, for sure, for sure. Just thinking back to those early times, that even then, we didn't have the type of pandemic or global crises that we have now, but even then, the importance of ensuring that you provide, that our government provides a safety net for individuals that are most vulnerable in times like this.

Chitra Ragavan:

So looking back at that young girl who was watching her maternal grandmother when she was seven or eight or nine and fighting for the rights of workers and looking at the journey that you've taken, from Compton to studying in Brentwood and onto college, and doing labor law and employment discrimination law, what would you say, looking back at that young woman, about the journey that you have undertaken?

Angela Reddock-Wright:

Just that it's been a good one. I mean, I feel like everything happens for a reason. I feel like each experience, if you recognize it, allows you to grow and to become a better person. I feel that I have been tremendously blessed, and there have been so many mentors and individuals that have looked out for me over my life and saw my energy and desire to be better, to do better, to give back to my community, and they've helped me along the way.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So I mostly just feel blessed and feel that at times when it's been a tough experience, like going from Compton to Brentwood or moving from Birmingham to California, although that wasn't tough, because I was a kid, and all I saw was Disneyland and the beach and having fun in California. But even that was a transition, and I'm just thankful, because each of those experiences ... and I didn't even talk about part of what Brentwood did for me is it exposed me to new opportunities, also, in terms of college.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

So I knew I would go to college, but I had no idea about the colleges outside of Harvard, Yale, places like that, of the different types of colleges that were available, particularly on the East Coast. One of my teachers, Ed McAtee, who was from the East Coast, African American man, and had kind of also grown up in the independent school world, he had gone to Amherst College, and he encouraged me to think about liberal arts colleges and made arrangements for me to go on a college visit trip to the East Coast.

Again, there, I saw a whole new world of colleges and the types of colleges available that were great and these wonderful places in New England and other places.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

But for that experience and exposure, I never would have gone to a school like Amherst college. In fact, my family and my friends are like, "Where are you going to college? Is that a real school? We thought you were smart. Why are you going to a school like that?," because we just didn't know about that, where I came from. So, of course, now I'm a big fan of liberal arts colleges.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

But so every experience shaped me. All along the way, there were individuals that saw my energy, saw my zeal, saw my zest, and wanted to help me to achieve my goals. So when I look back on my experiences, I think I'm mostly just grateful, and I feel a tremendous sense of duty and responsibility to help create those opportunities for others.

Chitra Ragavan:

Angela, thank you so much for joining me today and for this lovely and timely conversation.

Angela Reddock-Wright:

Thank you. It's been my pleasure.

Chitra Ragavan:

Angela Reddock-Wright is the founder of the Reddock Law Group in Los Angeles. She's an employment and workplace mediator and arbitrator and a Workplace and Title IX investigator. This is When It Mattered. I'm Chitra Ragavan.

Chitra Ragavan:

Thanks for listening to When It Mattered. Don't forget to subscribe to the show on Apple Podcasts or your preferred podcast platform, and if you like the show, please rate it five stars, leave a review, and do recommend it to your friends, family, and colleagues.

Chitra Ragavan:

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Chitra Ragavan:

Our producer is Jeremy Corr, Founder and CEO of Executive Podcasting Solutions. Our theme song is composed by Jack Yagerline. Join us next week for another edition of When It Mattered. I'll see you then.

